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Air Force Acquisition chief visits WPAFB

by 1st Lt. Dani Burrows, ASC Public Affairs

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — The Air Force's top acquisition official finished his first visit to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base on May 8th, calling the base a "national treasure."

"It's a great place to grow things in the Air Force," said Marvin R. Sambur, assistant secretary of the Air Force for acquisition, who is responsible for all Air Force research, development and acquisition activities. "This place has a lot to offer and it can offer even more."

Sambur admitted that before visiting the base, he "really didn't appreciate the capabilities that Wright-Patterson had, in particular the quality of the people, the creativity, the dedication and the enthusiasm that they have."

"Dr. Sambur's visit was a great opportunity to show him all that we do here for the acquisition community and the Air Force," said Vince Russo, ASC executive director. "It was an especially relevant opportunity to discuss our transformation."

According to Sambur, acquisition transformation is focused on developing "more agile, credible acquisition."

The average length of time for acquisition has been about 10 years, said Sambur. "We're hoping to cut that down by a factor of four, to two-and-a-half to two years. And we're embarking upon, with the help of many people here at Wright-Patterson, a set of pathfinders to help us develop the processes so that we can get down to that agility we need, because after all, technology is changing so quickly."

He said one of his most important goals is developing "collaborative agile acquisition."

"The word 'collaborative' is meant to mean that acquisition is more than just a responsibility of the people in the acquisition community," he said.

One of the difficulties to overcome is improving communications between technology developers and the war fighters.

"We don't know at the beginning what we really need, and we tend to put everything in it, making acquisition very difficult, very expensive, and at the end of the day you might have something you don't even need and you spent so long getting it," he said.

The goal, according to Sambur, is to "get out 80 percent capability, use it, adjust and go forward."

"All of the things that we learned in Afghanistan about unmanned aerial vehicles, all of those things happened relatively quickly. We were able to field things, for example the Predator, relatively quickly, getting it out into the field. We learned how it could be used, we learned what we needed to modify. We also learned about the importance of precision-guided munitions, and we're doing a lot to spiral that and adjust from that."

Another great challenge for the acquisition community is retaining the quality of the science and technology community, said Sambur.

During his visit, Sambur toured Air Force Research Laboratory, a key component between technology developers and warfighters.

"This was a great opportunity to demonstrate AFRL's transformational innovations to the Air Force's senior acquisition leader," said Maj. Gen. Paul D. Nielsen, commander of AFRL. "We look forward to future visits at our research sites across the country. Science and technology is the root of all transformational capability for the Air Force."

Sambur said, "The word has to be known about the really tremendously interesting, state-of-the-art work that's being done in the laboratories throughout the Air Force."

Looking ahead, Sambur addressed the future of the F-22 Raptor program, managed here.

"The F-22 is vital," he said. "It is, as our chief of staff said, an asset that knocks down the door." Although the program has come under recent scrutiny, according to Sambur, "None of (the obstacles) are show stoppers. We can get around all of them."

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

Sambur also challenged the people in Air Force Materiel Command to think differently.

“We can’t do things the way we’ve done in the past. A lot of people rely on the fact that ‘we’ve always done this.’ The fact of the matter is the world is changing. You can’t keep saying ‘we’ve always done it and therefore it’s good.’ We have to be able to experiment, to take risks, and that’s so important,” he said. “We have to have a culture that rewards people for taking risks and that’s what we’re trying to do within the acquisition community.” @